



FEATURED BOOK

Freedom's Forge: How American Business Produced Victory in World War II

Author(s):

Arthur Herman

Publisher:

Random House

Copyright Date:

2012

Available Online:

ISBN:

978-1-4000-6964-4

eBook 978-0-679-60463-1

Hard/Softcover:

Both, 413 pages

Reviewed by:

Dr. B. F. Cooling, Professor of National Security Studies, The Eisenhower School, National Defense University

Review:

Writing readable acquisition history can be difficult. Often the province of official histories that provide the first cut from a data bank, products can be mundane and factual but hardly exciting. In the hands of an accomplished writer such as Arthur Herman, however, it can be scintillating. Such is the case with

Freedom's Forge although Herman, associated with the American Enterprise Institute at the time of publication, trumpets the party line that every success traces to private enterprise. In this case, he advances that key elements and people from the business community won the Second World War. The question is, what can be learned from this approach? By introducing readers to corporate giants like automobile maker William Knudsen and shipbuilder Henry Kaiser, to name but two, Herman suggests a public spirit induced by Pearl Harbor, the winsome cajolery of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and opportunity for a generation of captains of industry to set aside profit, politics and competition to respond to the needs of a government and its military in time of peril. The story begins with aid to France and Great Britain standing alone against Nazism and Fascism before Pearl Harbor. It moves through conversion process from consumer to military need, touches upon wartime introduction of improved technology application whether artillery fuses, introduction of napalm or something as prosaic as Liberty cargo ships. It concludes with the reverse conversion of demobilization and a bright new postwar world carried forward on the waves of America's industrial victory.

Again, just what can today's acquisition professionals learn from a total war distant in time and space? For one thing, typical of such triumphalism, Herman's popular history simplifies the difficulties of mobilization and production, war financing, concern for wartime excess profits, ethics and corruption and labor difficulties that also attended the Second World War enterprise. The corps of government civilian bureaucrats as well as military logisticians hardly receive their due in this paean to private industry. Other equally conversant students of this wartime miracle by "the Greatest Generation" are more judicious in suggesting that public-private partnership of government and industry lay behind victory. Paul Koistinen, *Arsenal of World War II: The Political Economy of American Warfare 1940-1945*, Paul Kennedy, *Engineers of Victory* and Maury Klein, *A Call to Arms: Mobilizing America for World War II* are superior in that regard while A. J. Baime, *The Arsenal of Democracy: FDR, Detroit, and an Epic Quest to Arm an America at War* and even Jim Lacey, *Keep From All Thoughtful Men; How U.S. Economists*

Won World War II or chapters in a more obscure *The BIG L; American Logistics in World War II* edited by Alan Gropman almost twenty years ago also merit a visit. Herman under appreciates the fact that public funds and contracts, mobilization and procurement planning and execution are inherently government functions then and now. They start the wheels of production and underwrite private sector achievement in the first place. It is called teamwork whether in World War II or today.